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ABSTRACT

This study examined the benefits of early involvement in co-curricular activities and first-year seminars among first-year college students with respect to alcohol and other drug use, self-worth perceptions, attitudes toward social justice, engagement in the academic process, and community service involvement approximately 6 weeks into the fall term of the first year. Also considered were the housing arrangements of students: traditional dorms, college apartments, or at home with parents. Data were collected from 160 women and 50 men at a parochial liberal arts university. Students completed a student development survey and indicated the co-curricular activities in which they participated. Results show that becoming involved in co-curricular activities and specially designed small seminars for first-year students provides many benefits for students even in the first 6 weeks of school. Results at least suggest that becoming involved early in college pays dividends with respect to better attendance at classes, less binge drinking and illicit drug use, expressing a greater commitment to social justice, and placing a higher level of important on performing community service. Results also show that commuter students who lived at home appeared to benefit by being less involved in binge drinking and experienced fewer problems related to alcohol use. but they were also less involved in the social and co-curricular life of the college. (Contains 3 tables and 11 references.) (SLD)

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A summary paper prepared for the Roundtable, The Freshman Year: Transitions and Adjustments, at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 14, 2001, Seattle, WA.

The transition to college can be difficult for many adolescents and the extent to which students cope effectively with the transition can be related to the extent to which they persist until graduation (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Developing relationships in the college environment by becoming involved in the co-curricular environment of college has been found to be an essential ingredient for making a successful transition (Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). With the growing concern among researchers and college officials about binge drinking and its adverse consequences (e.g., Wechsler, Lee, Kuo, & Lee, 2000), developing relationships by becoming involved in campus activities may provide an avenue for students to avoid some of the pitfalls of excessive social drinking and increase their chances of remaining at the college.

The most critical time period in the transition students make to college is the first two to six weeks of the fall semester (Levitz & Noel, 1989). This would suggest that colleges and universities should have structures in place to provide opportunities for involvement at the very beginning of the semester and to encourage participation in the life of the college among first-year students (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). The first-year seminar, which takes many forms, from extended orientation seminars to rigorous academic seminars with small groups of students, is one such structure to which colleges have turned to connect students to mentors at the institution, thereby easing the transition for students (Barefoot & Gardner, 1993). Research (e.g., Barefoot & Gardner, 1993; Sidle & McReynolds, 1999) shows that students benefit in many ways, including greater levels of involvement and higher grades, from participating in a first-year seminar, as compared to students who do not participate.

The present study examines the benefits of early involvement in co-curricular activities and first-year seminars among first-year students with respect to alcohol and other drug use, self-worth perceptions, attitudes toward social justice, engagement in the academic process, and community service involvement approximately 6 weeks into the fall term of the first year. In addition, comparisons are made with respect to the type of housing into which first-year students are placed, whether students were housed in traditional first-year halls two to a room or in apartments with as many as five apartment mates or whether they commuted from their parents' homes. In the apartment housing, first-year students share the apartment with other first-year students but are exposed to older students who have apartments on the same floor and building. The literature (e.g., Ballou, 1996) suggests that the type of housing arrangement (exclusively first-year versus combined with upper-level students) can affect the behaviors and attitudes of

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first-year students.

Students' level of involvement in a community service and commitment to social justice are of particular interest in the present study of students who attend a religiously affiliated institution, which strongly supports participation in service within its mission, and where binge drinking frequency exceeds the national collegiate average.

Method

Data were collected from a random sample of students enrolled at a parochial liberal arts university on the east coast. For the present study, data were collected from 160 women and 50 men enrolled in the freshman year were used (32% response rate). The sample of traditional college-age students, with a mean age of 18.1 (SD=0.5), was predominately white (86%) and Catholic (75%). Eight percent of the sample were African American. Most students (93%) lived in college housing. There were no fraternities of sororities on campus.

Students received a seven-page Student Development Survey during the third week in October either directly from a member of the residence hall staff or, if a commuter, by mail. The survey included many scales (e.g., social and academic problems resulting from respondents' alcohol use) and items (e.g., frequency of binge drinking and marijuana use and amount of alcohol consumed during a typical weekend drinking episode) that appeared in national college student drinking studies conducted by the Harvard Graduate School of Public Health (Wechsler et al., 1994) and others. In addition, participants completed several demographic items and scales of attitudes and behaviors that included daily hassles (14 items, developed by the first author, alpha=.78), self-worth (6 items, based on Rosenberg, 1965, alpha=.81), commitment to social justice (6 items, Fenzel, 1996, alpha=90), conflictual independence from parents (6 items, based on Hoffman, 1984, alpha=.82), and symptoms of anxiety (from the SCL-90; 8 items, alpha=.88). Students were also asked to name up to 6 different co-curricular activities in which they had participated during the first six weeks of school, as well as any leadership positions they held in those activities.

Results

Comparison of active and inactive students. Students who reported being involved in one or more activities on campus (N=114) were compared with students reporting no such activity (N=95) for the first six weeks of the freshman year on a number of factors. Results, which are found in Table 1, showed that active students drank less when they consumed alcohol on weekends, reported fewer problems related to their alcohol consumption, used marijuana less frequently, missed fewer classes, and reported less conflict with their parents. In addition, students who were involved in co-curricular activities reported a higher estimated GPA and held higher convictions regarding social justice and the importance of doing community service. There were no differences between groups of students in terms of the expressed importance of academics, feelings of self-worth, anxiety levels, or the levels of stress experienced.

Comparison of students enrolled in special freshman seminar programs and those not enrolled. As outlined in Table 2, students who reported being enrolled in one of three special academic enrichment seminar programs during the first semester (N=106) showed signs that they were experiencing an easier transition to college than those not enrolled in these elective programs (N=100). For example, students who selected one of these programs were involved in less frequent binge drinking, drank less on weekends when they did drink, used marijuana less frequently, missed fewer classes, regarded community service as more important, and were more committed to social justice. Contrary to expectations, results showed these seminar students to be experiencing more conflict with their parents, as compared to students not enrolled in any of the seminars.

Differences based on students' residences. Of the students responding to the survey, 69 resided in a newly constructed hall with a traditional arrangement of double rooms that opened onto a double-loaded corridor (Traditional I), 63 in one of two 4-story older freshman residence halls located on the edge of campus (Traditional II), 61 in 2- or 3-bedroom high-rise or garden apartments, and 16 commuted from their parents' home. Analyses of variance comparing the four groups showed significant differences in three measures associated with students' drinking, with commuter students reporting significantly lower levels of binge drinking and going to bars to drink than resident students, and resident apartment dwellers showing generally highest levels of drinking. Students located in Traditional II housing were the most active in co-curricular activities with post hoc results showing significantly greater involvement than commuters. See Table 3.

Conclusions

Consistent with the work of researchers and student development leaders with respect to college success for first-year students, the results of the present study show that becoming involved in co-curricular activities and specially designed small seminars for first-year students provides many benefits for students even in the first six weeks of their college careers. Although the correlational nature of the data preclude drawing conclusions about cause-and-effect relations, results at least suggest that becoming involved early in college pays dividends with respect to better attendance at classes, less binge drinking and illicit drug (i.e., marijuana) use, expressing a greater commitment to social justice, and placing a higher level of importance on performing community service. Both high levels of class attendance and lower levels of binge drinking are likely to contribute to student classroom success and accompanying higher levels of academic self-efficacy.

One student scenario that the results of the present study suggest is that students who choose to get involved either through the first-year seminars or co-curricular activities are able to find peers with whom they begin to feel connected and share activities that do not involve binge drinking or illicit drug use. Because of the pull that binge drinking has among college students (Wechsler, Davenport, et al., 1994; Wechsler, Lee, et al., 2000), many students may welcome alternative activities that take them away from the heavy drinking scene and enable them to be

more focused on academic matters. As Upcraft and Gardner (1989) have suggested, successful first-year seminars are those that combine academic challenge with specific co-curricular activities, such as social gatherings and group cultural events, that help students make connections to others and to the institution. This early connection is important because students who feel they have made a successful transition to college are more likely to thrive in the environment and persist until graduation (Levitz & Noel; Upcraft & Gardner).

Results also show that, although commuter students appear to benefit by being less involved in binge drinking and experiencing fewer problems related to their alcohol consumption, they were less involved in the social and co-curricular life of the college. This latter finding, although not surprising, presents particular challenges to institutions of higher education, considering the importance researchers place on students needing to feel a sense of connectedness to their institutions early in the first year of study (Levitz & Noel, 1989; Upcraft & Gardner, 1989). Colleges and universities may need to make special efforts to involve commuters in the academic, co-curricular, and social experiences of the institution.

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Table 1

Analyses of Differences between Students Who Participated in Cocurricular Activities and Students Who Had Yet to Participate by Week 6 of Freshman Year (N = 209)

Variable	Non-Participator (N=95) Mean (SD)	Participator (N=114) Mean (SD)	t
Binge Drinking Frequency	2.5 (1.5)	2.3 (1.3)	1.05
Typical Alcohol Consumed	3.8 (2.0)	3.3 (1.7)	1.79*
Problems Due to Alcohol Use	5.1 (5.9)	3.1 (3.6)	2.97**
Marijuana Use	1.1 (1.2)	.7 (1.1)	2.96**
Importance of Academics	2.9 (.3)	3.0 (.2)	-1.42
Frequency of Missed Classes	1.6 (.8)	1.2 (.9)	3.22***
Estimated GPA	3.03 (.53)	3.21 (.44)	-2.49**
Importance of Community Service	.8 (.7)	1.4 (.6)	-6.86***
Social Justice Commitment	7.1 (2.9)	8.8 (2.4)	- 4.40***
Anxiety Level	4.7 (3.8)	4.7 (3.7)	- .08
Conflictual Indep. from Parents	5.5 (3.0)	3.1 (3.6)	2.50**
Experience of Hassles	17.2 (5.6)	18.2 (5.6)	- 1.32

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 2

Analyses of Differences between Students Who Were Enrolled in a Special Seminar and Students Who Were Not Enrolled during Fall Semester of Freshman Year (N = 206)

	Not Enrolled (N=100)	Enrolled (N=106)	
Variable	Mean (SD)	Mean (SD)	t
Binge Drinking Frequency	2.7 (1.4)	2.1 (1.4)	3.38***
Typical Alcohol Consumed	4.0 (1.8)	3.0 (1.8)	3.54***
Problems Due to Alcohol Use	4.4 (5.1)	3.6 (3.6)	1.14
Marijuana Use	1.1 (1.2)	.7 (1.1)	2.57**
Importance of Academics	2.9 (.3)	3.0 (.3)	- .64
Frequency of Missed Classes	1.6 (.8)	1.2 (.9)	3.34***
Estimated GPA	3.08 (.50)	3.19 (.47)	-1.47
Importance of Community Service	.9 (.8)	1.3 (.7)	-4.43***
Social Justice Commitment	7.5 (2.9)	8.6 (2.5)	- 2.98**
Anxiety Level	4.4 (3.6)	5.1 (3.9)	- 1.40
Conflictual Indep. from Parents	5.7 (3.0)	6.5 (3.1)	2.09*
Experience of Hassles	17.5 (5.0)	18.0 (6.1)	- .68

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Table 3

Analyses of Differences between Students Who Reside in Three Types of Residences during Freshman Year

Variable	Traditional I (N=69) Mean (SD)	Traditional II (N=63) Mean (SD)	Apartment (N=61) Mean (SD)	Commuter (N=16) Mean (SD)	F
Binge Drinking Freq.[1]	2.6 (1.4)	2.4 (1.3)	2.5 (1.5)	1.3 (.9)	3.80**
Alcohol Consumed[2]	3.7 (1.7)	3.2 (1.8)	3.8 (2.0)	2.1 (1.5)	3.04*
Freq. Bar Drinking[1]	1.4 (1.2)	1.6 (1.1)	1.5 (1.3)	.3 (.7)	5.63***
Prob. from Alcohol[2]	4.0 (4.0)	4.2 (5.5)	4.6 (5.5)	.6 (1.2)	2.45*
Marijuana Use	1.0 (1.1)	.9 (1.0)	.8 (1.0)	.8 (1.1)	.35
Freq. Missed Class	1.5 (.8)	1.5 (.9)	1.4 (.9)	1.1 (.9)	1.09
Estimated GPA	3.14 (.44)	3.04 (.59)	3.20 (.41)	3.35 (.39)	1.74
Att. Commun. Svc[1]	1.0 (1.0)	1.0 (1.0)	1.0 (.9)	.2 (.6)	3.05*
# of Activities[4]	1.6 (1.3)	1.8 (2.0)	1.5 (1.2)	.6 (.9)	2.79*
Diff. w/ Roommates[3]	1.0 (1.0)	.8 (.9)	1.4 (.9)	N/A	7.14***
Hassles	17.2 (5.3)	17.8 (5.1)	18.9 (6.5)	16.4 (4.8)	1.35

* $p < .05$ ** $p < .01$ *** $p < .001$

Post hoc results: [1]All campus residences differ from Commuter; [2]Apartment differs from Commuter; [3] Apartment differs from Traditional II; [4]Traditional II differs from Commuter